A Synopsis on

Portrayal of Women Slaves in the Select Neo-Slave Narratives: A Study

Submitted
For

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Title**: Portrayal of Women Slaves in the Select Neo-Slave Narratives: A Study**

1.Introduction:

The slave narratives are autobiographical accounts of enslaved, escaped, and freed Africans in America. Over six thousand such narratives are expected to be in existing and out of them near about one hundred and fifty narratives were published as separate books or pamphlets.

The neo-slave narratives as a distinct literary genre in African-American literature has emerged as the effect of the renaissance of the postmodern slave narratives in the 20th century, was a means to deal retrospectively with slavery and to give historical facts in terms of their powerful fictional accounts. The term "Neo-slave narrative" is coined by *Ishmael Reed* while working on his 1976 novel *"Flight to Canada"* and used by him in a 1984 interview. Neo-slave narratives are modern fictional works set in the slavery period by the contemporary writers who subsequently depict the experience or effects of slavery in the New world. They revisit the horrible lives of their ancestors through imagination and narrate the stories which have been lost and buried in the dead past. Not only they brought the tragedy of their ancestors through literature but also contemplated the effect of slavery persisting in the form of inequality in the present American society.

The Neo-slave narratives mainly focus on the intricate relations between the masters and slaves and also the slaves among themselves. These themes were ignored by the traditional slave narratives. The traditional slave narratives told the accounts from the perspective of only one person who is a newly escaped or freed slave. But the neo-slave narratives told the stories from the perspective of multiple characters which help the readers to have a broad understanding of the institution of slavery and its tragic effect on slaves.

In my studies of African- American literature, I found the genre neo-slave narratives more interesting and observed the institution of slavery in different perspectives. Especially the problem of maltreatment of women slaves by their white masters, their quest for freedom and their courageous attempts to escape from the plantations, resort houses, jails and from their kitchens led me to probe more in to this area. I realized that it is a high relevance genre in

the twenty-first century American society as it explores the institution of racial slavery in the context of women slaves in America from 17th to 19th century and persist its effect on African-Americans still today. Hence I strongly decided to probe and research the contemporary neo-slave narratives with focus to women slaves to gain insight in to the workings of the institution of slavery and its effect in the present American society.

For this study I have selected the contemporary Neo-slave narratives which are Dolen Perkins Waldez's *"Wench :A Novel"* published in the year 2010, "*Yellow Wife" by* Sadeqa Johnson published in the year 2021, Colson Whitehead's *"The underground Railroad*", published in the year 2016, and *"The Water Dancer"* by Ta-Nehisi Coats published in 2019.

These novels portray the tragic condition of women slaves, their lives and their trails to escape from the white masters. The study also allows me to investigate the curtailment of basic human rights of slaves and its impact on the individual and society. Further the study allows me to explore the origin and evolution of the institution of slavery in America and also the slave narratives and neo-slave narratives in African-American literature.

2. HYPOTHESIS:

It is hypothesizes that

- The select novels contain historical fiction.
- The themes and elements like quest for freedom, intersexual feminism, race, gender, sexuality, trauma, violence and social inequity.
- Tragic elements of slavery in the past and its impact on present lives of African-Americans.
- The different perspectives of characterization of women slaves.

The study aims at testing the hypotheses with suitable illustrations from the selected novels.

3. OBJECTIVES:

1.To study the history and evolution of African- American literature, particularly Neo-slave narratives.

2.. To focus on women slave characterization in the select novels.

3. To bring out the institution of slavery with reference to the select novels.

4.To refer the attempts to escape from the plantations, jails and resorts by the women slaves in select novels.

5. To highlight the brutal and routine abuse on women slaves by their white masters.

6. To Understand the concept of the Underground Railroad.

7.To explore gender stratification.

8.To investigate the impact of imperialism on women of colour.

9.To investigate on freedom, violence and social inequality in the select novels.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The methodology to be adopted for the present research is descriptive, analytical, and critical study with the help of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources for this study are the select works of the neo-slave narratives and the secondary sources are the reference books, articles published in the national and international journals, literary work containing the topic, book reviews on the select topics, television interviews by the authors, criticism on the topic and other works in the form of print and electronic media. The data will be critically analyzed and evaluated with the objectives. The MLA method will be used to cite the references of primary and secondary sources.

5.The Scope and Limitations of Research :

African American Neo-slave narratives with special focus to women slaves will be studied in this research work and this study is restricted to the select novels by contemporary Neo-slave narratives named Dolen Perkins Valdez, Sadeqa Johnson, Colson Whitehead and Ta-Nehisi Coates.

6. Significance of the Research :

Many researchers have studies the Afro-American slave narratives and neo-slave narratives in various dimensions like racism, slavery, culture and social equality, but very less research has been done this genre with special focus to women slaves.

The influence of slavery,treatment of women slaves, particularly by their white masters, their adverse condition at the plantation fields, jails and at other places are still in the conscious of many African –Americans.

Hence the present research work is significant to study the problem of maltreatment of women slaves by their white masters, their pathetic condition, their trails to escape from the plantation fields from the select novels.

To study and analyze the texts with the perspective of women slaves emerged primarily after the World War II and it will definitely contribute to the branch of knowledge. No work of this sort has been taken up at any level. Hence the present study has got the significance.

7. Review of Literature:

African- American literature:

African- American literature has had a long history. This literature has been produced in the United States of America by the African descent. The life of the African- Americans is filled with emotional distress and violence. This is reflected in their literature as well. The main themes explored in this literature are the status of African- American people in the American society. African- American culture, racism, slavery, social equality, segregation, migration and so on. Before the American Civil War, the literature primarily consisted of memories by people who had escaped from enslavement. This literature has been called as "save narratives" which included the accounts of life in enslavement and the path of justice and denial of freedom. There was an early distinction between the literature of 'freed slaves' and the literature of 'free blacks' born in the North. Free blacks in the North often spoke out against enslavement and racial injustice using the spiritual narratives. The slave narratives reached its high peak in the nineteenth century.*The Harlem Renaissance* of 1920s was a great period of flowering in literature and arts.

In the twentieth century, non-fiction works by authors like W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington discussed and argued about how to confront racism in the United States. During the Civil Rights movement, authors such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about issues of racial segregation and Black Nationalism. Today, African- American literature has been accepted as an internal part of American literature. The books such as *"Roots: The Saga of an American Family"* by Alex Haley, "*The Color Purple"(*1982) by Alice Walker, "The Underground Railroad "(2016) ,the present study and "The Nickel Boys"(2019) by Colson

Whitehead and "Beloved"(1987) by Toni Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. Nobel prize is also given to Toni Morrison for literature in the year1993.

African- American literary Criticism:

The origins of African-American literary criticism can be traced to the late nineteenth century. During this period the European ideas about the African slavery were critically accepted. They were exposed to racism and slavery. The Europeans thought that they have no civilization and it need to be taught to them by the more cultured and European models. This period saw the poetry of Phyllis Wheatley(1753-1784), the preaches and writings of Frederick Douglass, the emergence of slave narratives as a new literary genre from 1760s and so on.

The origin of the classic slave narratives can be traced to the rise of the slavery abolishment movement in the late eighteenth century. Their personal and political documents served the purpose of abolishment cause with their powerful description of the brutal life under the slavery. Most of them described the attempts by the slaves to escape to freedom. The attempts were sometimes depictions of spiritual journeys to salvation.

Neo-Slave Narratives:

Many African-American writers begin their narratives with the desire to search for their ancestral and historical roots, which has become one of the main concerns of this neo-slave narratives. The writers adventure to go back to their past to the period of slavery. The horrible life of their enslaved ancestors is re-imagined and penned in their writings with powerful literary terms, which led to the emergence of Neo-slave narratives as a literary genre. The works depicts the accounts and commentary both on past and the present as well, slavery had been practiced a long back in the history, but its impact is still on the lives of Afro-Americans and they assume that it would remain in future as well. Some of the important themes of these narratives are identity, slavery, racism, gender, sexuality, memories and so on. The Neo-slave narratives strongly condemn slavery and helps in redressing the past injustices and tries to facilitate the process of healing to the wounds caused by slavery.

8. TENTATIVE CHAPTER SCHEME:

Chapter One:

Introduction:

History and evolution of African- American literature:

The introductory chapter explains the historical, cultural and social background of my study. It includes a brief history of African- American literature, emergence of slave narratives as a separate genre and also exposure of Neo-Slave narratives as a distinctive genre. The contribution of eminent Neo- slave writers to the African- American literature is also explored.

Chapter Two :

A Study of Women slaves in "Wench: A Novel" by Dolen Perkins Valdez

Wench is a historical fiction written by American author Dolen Perkins valdez which is published in the year 2010, nominated for the NAACP image Award for outstanding Literary work. The plot set in the years before the Civil war. The story is about the four black slave women whose white masters keep them as their mistresses at the Tawana house Resort in the free state of Ohio and the white masters live with them as if they are partners.

The three slaves named Lizzie, Reenie and Sweet are brought to the Tawana House every year in the summer by their white masters. They are known to each other very well as the regular visit and stay at the resort for the several years.

One day, a new slave named Mawu arrives at Tawana House. Persuading the other three slaves to seriously consider her plan of escape from the place. On listening the plan about escape the other three slaves immediately attracted to her as she behaves fearlessly and speaks frankly and they have never seen such a daring women of captive before. At the first time they confine of their lives and thinking over the possibilities to flee from their captors. Mawu's master Tip is an extremely cruel and abuses her in routine unlike the other's masters. The other three women have never entertained the idea of flight as they have come to enjoy the benefits of being mistresses to the white masters and do not care or worry about their enslavement. They have less duties on plantation, get decent food, in some cases they get an education and in addition they have children and their elevated status as mistresses to white masters affords the kids some additional protections and special benefits.

The three women assume that if they try to run away from the place, their master would catch them and give the punishment as other slaves and they may lose the benefits. The punishment would be an extreme in case of the slaves who attempt to flee.

Mawu, during her first summer at Tawana House tries to free herself from Tip. One night she secretly slips to an other resort behind them in the woods and meets some free blacks who lives there. They gave her advise to escape and a map of safe houses so she can plot her route to New York . When she discussed with other three women about it they declined her proposal of escape finding the risk in it. Lizzie informs about Mawu's plan to her master, Drayle and DrayletoTip. Then ,Tip furiously drags Mawu to the resort's courtyard and punishes brutally and sodomizes in front of all. Later Mawu determines than ever to escape.

Mawu, during her second summer at Tawana House, remains enslaved by Tip. Spurned by her friends Lizzie slipping away and spending time with Glory, a white abolitionist who gives Lizzie abolitionist literature which she shares with her friends. Thus her friends begin to warm to her again. Sweet on the hand becomes mad and eventually dies on hearing the words of outbreak of cholera that cause to death of her surviving children at the back home of her plantation.

The incident of dying Sweet inspires Mawu and reenie to form an escape plan. Meanwhile one night Mawu and Tips cabin bursts into flames. Tip escapes largely unscathed .Mawu is saved by other women. Reenie nurses Mawu back at her cabin, and the next morning the two women gone out from Tawana House.

The next summer, Lizzie returns to resorts and meets Glory. With the help of Glory she could be able to reunite with Mawu in the woods. Reenie has escaped to NewYork and become free. As Lizzie chooses to stay with Drayle, Mawu could not want to leave her behind in captivity. Though she runs to escape, slave catchers find her on the second day of her flight and return her to Tip where her punishment could an extreme way either beating, torture or death.

Chapter Three

Characterization of women slaves in "Yellow Wife" by Sadeqa Johnoson:

"Yellow Wife" is a historical fiction written by an American author Sadeqa Johnson which is published in the year 2021.
It is about the story of Pheby Delores Brown, a biracial girl, who is a daughter of an enslaved woman named Ruth and a plantation owner, Jacob Bell, born in a Charles City, Virginia. Bell promises Ruth that when Pheby turns 18, he will send her to the North to be free and educated. Once Ruth and Bell goes on a trip and Pheby is left behind for a care with Delphina Bell, Jacob's wife, who is jealous and cruel to her. Pheby learns that Delphina has been forcing sex

with an enslaved worker named Essex Henry, the man who loves. Pheby. Delphina becomes pregnant with Essex's child, and Pheby realizes that Essex has no option other than to escape. She helps to find passage for him to the North. When Essex asks her to come with him, Pheby holds to Bell's promise that he will assist her when she turns eighteen .

A carriage accident leaves Ruth and Jacob Bell in dire physical condition. While Bell is cared for by a neighbor, Ruth is transferred back to Bell Plantation with no concern for her health. Pheby is forced to continue to help Delphina. Pheby is arrested for suspicion of helping Essex to escape at her mother's funeral.

After eight days of marching chained with other saves and with little food and water, Pheby is taken to Lapier's jail, a holding cell for the selling and trading of enslaved peoples. Rubin Lapier, the owner of the jail, takes a liking to Pheby and keeps her for himself. After a few months, Pheby realizes that she is pregnant with Essex's child. She learns that Rubin hopes to make her his mistress. At first, Rubin showers Pheby with gifts and treats her kindly, but Pheby is aware that she is still enslaved by Rubin and sees the evidence of his cruelty. She delivers four children by Rubin; their children have light skin and are brought up as white children.

Pheby is continuously conflicted while living with Rubin. She must act as though she loves him and live as his wife. Pheby entertains Rubin's friends and guests, other enslavers, and prepares young women for sale into sex work. She secures a tutor for her four daughters while living in fear that her son will be sold to another enslaver and taken from her. Pheby is forced to share Rubin's bed and tell him she loves him, all while knowing that she is not the only enslaved woman with whom he is having a sexual relationship.

Although she benefits from her status as his mistress, her position is precarious and dangerous. Pheby is forced to make impossible choices to protect herself and her children. When Essex is captured in the North and delivered to Lapier's jail for punishment, Pheby liaisons with him privately and helps him to escape. She also secures passage for their son and two other enslaved workers from Lapier's jail.

Chapter Four:

Depiction of women slaves in "The Underground Railroad" written by Colson Whitehead.

The Underground railroad is a historical fiction by an American author Colson Whitehead published in the year 2016.This novel tells the story of Cora who is a slave in the Antebellum South during the nineteenth century makes an attempt to free from her Georgia plantation through the Underground Railroad. The book won the several literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in the year 2017.

In the story Cora is a slave on a plantation in Georgia. Caesar, a fellow slave in the same plantation fields approaches Cora about a plan to escape. At the beginning she was reluctant about the plan and eventually agrees as her situation with her master and fellow slaves became worsen. During their escape they unexpectedly met a group of slave catchers, who capture Cora's young friend Lovely. Cora is forced to kill a twelve year old boy to protect herself form the slave captures. Cora and Caesar find the Underground Railroad which is depicted as a literal underground train system that runs throughout the south transporting runaways northwards. They caught a train to South Carolina.

Upon listening to the news of their escape Ridgeway, a slave catcher begins a hunt for them particularly in revenge for Mabel, Cora's mother and who was an only escapist in the past from the hands of Ridgeway. The pair have taken up a comfortable residence in South Carolina under assumed names. After few days she learns of plans to sterilize black women and use black men as the experimentsubject to track the effects of syphilis. Cora is forced to leave the city alone through Railroad before the arrival of Ridgeway. Eventually Cora arrives at the closed-down station in North Carolina and she is found by Martin, the son of the station's former operator. Martin gives shelter to her in his home and hides her in his attic for several months out of the fear that North Carolinians might do any threat to runaway slave as the North Carolina decided to abolish slavery in the state and violently execute the runaway slaves. Cora becomes ill and is reluctantly treated by Martin's wife, Ethel. Cora is recaptured in the raid conducted by Ridgeway.

While Ridgeway takes Cora back to Georgia the travelling party is attacked by the free-born Royal and other two slaves, who release Cora. Cora goes to a farm in Indiana owned by a free black man named Valentine along with Royal. Royal starts a romantic relationships with Cora

even though she hesitates. Harboring non-members of the community is opposed by a small fraction of freedmen eventually the farm is burnt in the raid by white Hoosiers and many people are burnt including Royal. Ridgeway recaptures Cora and forced her to take him to the near by closed down Railroad station. When they arrive their she pushes him to the flight of stairs and runs off down the tracks. Eventually she comes out from the underground and finds a caravan travelling out West.

Chapter Five

Portrayal of Women Slaves in "The Water Dancer" written by Ta-Nehisi Coates

"The Water Dancer", a historical fiction published in the year 2019 is written by Ta-Nehisi Coats who is an American author, journalist and activist. He wrote about culture, social, political issues and particularly about African Americans. He received a Genius Grant from the Mac Arthur Foundation in 2015.

This is a story of Hiram, who lives in a town called Starfall near the river Goose, is a slave in on the estate of Lockless in Virginia. His mother Rose is an enslaved woman and was sold when he was very young and father is the White master of Lockless, **Howell Walker**. He has power called conduction. Thena , another slave, an old woman who helps to rise him. He is made a personal servant to his half brother named Maynard. He tries to run away with another slave named Sofia, who is Howell's brother Nathaniel's enslaved concubine but they are captured. Before the days of one Christmas some enslaved and local people discussed about Santi Bess, Hiram's grand mother and a mother of Rose who is said to be liberated herself and other forty eight enslaved people by leading them back to Africa through the River Goose.

Hiram is brought to a woman called Corrine, who is connected to the Underground and he is sent to Philadelphia in connection to help slaves to be free. He overwhelmed there by seeking more free black people. He meets Raymond white and Otha in the city. Raymond White is an Underground agent whose parents were escaped from the plantation and reunited in Philadelphia. Otha is his brother who was separated from him as a child and reunited in Philadelphia. He started living with Otha in the city and learnt about Lydia otha's wife, who remains enslaved in Alabama. He also meets Thena's daughter.

Hiram returns to Virginia to free Sofia on whom he is interested and Thena. Sofia is the enslaved mistress of Howell's brother Nathaniel. He finds that Sofia is pregnant with a baby by Nathaniel and still he loves her. When Howell is died Corrine acquires the Lockless and asks to supervise.

Chapter Six

Conclusion:

Conclusion is the last chapter of the study, aims at summing up the women slaves, depicted in the select fictions of Dolen Perkins Valdez , Sadeqa Johnson, Colson Whitehead and Ta-Nehisi Coates. The similarities and variations in the works are compared with reference to portrayal of the women slaves. The perspective of select authors on women slaves is brought in to light. The conclusions are drawn up as per the objectives.

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SCHEDULE OF THE RESEARCH WORK:

The actual research work will begin after the confirmation of my topic, the schedule of the research will be as follows.

First Six Months : Collection of referential material and start writing the introduction part on African- American literature, emergence of Slave-narratives and Neo-slave narratives.

Second Six Months: Collection of the referential material including primary and the secondary sources and writing of the Second Chapter from the selected novel of Dolen Perkins Valdez.

Third Six Months: Collection of essential referential material and writing the third Chapter from the selected novel of Sadeqa Johnson.

Fourth Six Months: Collection of essential referential material and writing the fourth Chapter from the selected novel of Colson Whitehead.

Fifth Six Months: Collection of essential referential material and writing the fifth Chapter from the selected novel of Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Conclusion:

The conclusion is the last chapter of the study, aims at summing up the women slaves, depicted in the select fictions

Bibliography

In the following month, careful and systematic reading of research work will be done and it will be followed by printing, binding and submission of the thesis.

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